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SUBJECT: Pacific Roundtable for Nature Conservation Meets to
Consider its Future: Emphasizes Strengthening Pacific Governments

REF A) 07 Port Moresby 370 (NOTAL)

REF B) Suva 081

11. Summary: The Pacific Roundtable on Nature Conservation (RT) held a special meeting in Suva, Fiji in late June to consider how the organization and its members can have the greatest positive impact on the region's environment over the next five years. One high-priority need it identified was government and local capacity building. The meeting focused on the future functions of the RT and the process to monitor the implementation of "the Action Strategy for Nature Conservation in the Pacific Islands Region 2008-2012." Issues such as lack of capacity in the region and government commitment need special attention if conservation targets are to be achieved. The RT concluded with USP, SPREP, SOPAC, TNC, CI, LMMA Network, WWF and IUCN Oceania Office signing the RT Charter, which includes a Code of Conduct. Participants also voiced concern over increasing exploitation of island resources by countries from outside the region and considered how to provide timely input into Pacific island country's decision-making processes. Examples include concern over possible environmental impacts of commercial fishing, logging and seabed mining. In addition, participants were very interested in the Coral Triangle Initiative and USG plans to support it. End Summary.

12. The RT met from 24 to 27 June at the University of the South Pacific (USP) to confirm and make decisions on the function and process of the RT for the next five years, begin the process of signing each organization on to the new Action Strategy that was developed during the 8th Pacific Islands Conference on Nature Conservation and Protected Areas in Alotau in October 2007 (reftel A), make commitments as to how each organization plans to achieve the objectives of the Action Strategy and discuss how the "Code of Conduct" and objectives will be implemented and monitored. Representatives of local and international NGOs took part in the meeting together with participants from SPREP, USP, and SOPAC as well as a handful of government officials from donor countries. Mark Fornwall, the USGS National Biological Information Infrastructure (NBII) Pacific Basin Information Node coordinator; John Mosesso, NBII Gap Analysis Program manager; and Embassy Suva's Regional Environment Affairs Specialist (RES) Sandeep K. Singh were the USG participants.

13. The RT is a membership-based network of donors, NGOs and regional agencies that is focused on promoting, facilitating, and monitoring progress toward achieving the goals of "the Action Strategy for

Nature Conservation in the Pacific Islands Region 2008-2012." The Pacific island governments are not individual members of the RT but are represented by SPREP. The intention of the RT is to provide a forum of "donors and doers," to respond more meaningfully to the nature conservation needs of the region. (The RT normally meets just once a year and, given its voluntary nature, many participants' engagement has been quite limited.) The new Chair, Taholo Kami (IUCN Oceania Director), advocated a different mindset and expressed a determination for the RT to "make a difference." To help realize this more activist vision, the RT endorsed hiring of a full time Coordinator, and several NGOs committed funding for the three-year position.

NGOs Told to Enter into Dialogue with National Governments

14. In the keynote address, Austral Foundation Director Annette Lees presented the outcomes of her recent review of Fiji's conservation sector. Her report raises issues that are common in most Pacific island countries such as weak leadership, lack of government capacity, and a lack of ownership of environmental problems and their solutions. Lees' remarks and the published report of her findings formed the basis for much of the RT discussion. (The report can be downloaded from <http://australfoundation.org/publications.htm> 1.) One of the concerns Lees raised was what she termed the intense "unhealthy" competition between international NGOs working in the Pacific. NGOs are not collaborating/cooperating with each other to achieve biodiversity goals, she said. RT Chair Kami noted this concern and proposed that NGO's utilize the RT as a forum to better coordinate their efforts. Lees remarks also highlighted the weakness of Pacific governments relative to major NGOs both in terms of capacity and funding

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Government Support/Capacity Building

15. RT members agreed that there was a sense of urgency for their work given that biodiversity continues to decline in the region despite the considerable resources provided for conservation here. Participants also agreed that more support needed to be provided to governments in meeting national priorities as identified under the National Biodiversity Strategy Action Plans (NBSAPs) with an initial focus on helping PNG, the Solomon Islands and Fiji to develop/implement their NBSAPs. (These three countries were selected as part of new strategy for developing relationships with Pacific island countries. Each year specific countries will be selected for emphasis in order to encourage proactive engagement at the country level.) Participants urged NGO to pay attention to this particular need and to do all they can to support governments. A working group has been formed to assess capacity needs of countries and to communicate gaps identified and the consequent resources needed to RT members and donors. Participants agreed that capacity building should be an essential component of any future projects.

Pacific Island Nationals as Conservation Leaders

16. Many RT participants spoke strongly of the need for Pacific islanders to take control of the management of their resources and be leaders in conservation. To achieve these outcomes, they all agreed that more capacity building and strategic thinking will be required. Some basic governance issues must be addressed as well. Some members were concerned about local brain drain as experts in national governments leave to join international agencies and NGOs, which, although based in the Pacific, are effectively removing the most skilled environmental professionals from government service. The RT noted that efforts must be directed towards assisting governments to deal with some of these issues and encouraged greater engagement of Pacific island governments in conservation efforts to help ensure their sustainability. (One suggestion was for NGOs to fund project staff within the Government agencies.)

Pacific Islanders and Outside Actors

17. Some participants commented that non-Pacific actors are driving the conservation agenda with little local ownership or involvement and also raised questions about the membership of Roundtable itself,

since it is dominated by major international NGOs. Taking up a theme from Lees' report, these participants suggested that, while outside actors could play an important role in achieving conservation outcomes in the region through useful advice, more Pacific islanders need to be part of discussions and take ownership and leadership and be held responsible for the state of their resources.

¶18. FSPI and WWF urged participants to facilitate and champion community based approaches to conservation but as RT Chair Kami observed, many Pacific governments feel that they are often bypassed in community-based efforts and, as a result, sometimes don't cooperate with NGOs. To help resolve these suspicions, Kami suggested that NGOs and governments revisit their respective Memoranda of Understanding (MoU). Governments and NGOs could use this review as a tool for more effective collaboration. The RT will encourage these Governments that do not have MoUs in place with NGOs working in their countries to develop them.

What Does the Region Need?

¶19. While many argued that Pacific islands needed more resources, especially funding, to achieve better conservation results, some, including Lees argued that no matter what level of funding is available, little will be achieved unless the region has a coherent strategy in place for nature conservation. She also added that there have been too many pilot projects and that the Pacific needs to get out of this "pilot project mentality." Since numerous local models are available that just need scaling up, she encouraged participants to stop wasting resources on new pilots.

RT Charter and Code of Conduct - Will this do the magic?

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¶10. The Chair presented members with a Charter that included a Code of Conduct and outlined the RT and Action Strategy Process. (A copy of the Charter can be obtained by sending a request to singhsk1@state.gov). Participants agreed that anyone who wants to become a full member of the RT will need to sign the Charter with its Code of Conduct. (This Code of Conduct is the Implementation Principles section of the Action Strategy that was developed in Alotau.) The RT would like the Charter to serve as the basis for how RT members (including donors) undertake their work in the region, and most participants endorsed monitoring the implementation of the Charter as a key role of the RT Chair. NGOs and Inter-governmental agencies that signed the Charter and Code of Conduct at this meeting include SPREP, SOPAC, USP, WWF, CI, TNC, the LMMA Network and the IUCN Oceania Office. Some organizations (FSPI and WCS) said they needed more time to discuss the Charter with their implementing partners before signing up. Government participants were not expected to sign but the RT Chair will present the Charter and Code of Conduct at the annual SPREP Meeting in the hope that it will be endorsed by governments then.

RT Working Groups

¶11. The RT constituted a number of working groups at this meeting. A Management Working Group, which will include USGS's Fornwall, was formed to provide assistance with the day to day operation of the RT. Other working groups include, Monitoring, Coral Triangle Initiative (CTI), Community-based Management, Oceanic Fisheries Management, Invasive Species, Unsustainable Agricultural Practices, and Pollution/Enrichment. It is still unclear at this stage how the working groups will operate, and participants are preparing Terms of Reference for them. The next full meeting of the Roundtable will be in the Solomon Islands in 2009.

Concerns Raised over Seabed Mining

¶12. Participants also voiced concern over increasing exploitation of island resources by countries from outside the region and considered how to provide timely input into Pacific island country's decision-making processes. Specific issues included the environmental impacts of commercial fishing, logging and seabed mining. The fact that some Pacific island countries are working

with companies that want to exploit deep sea mineral resources in the Pacific, and the pace of this development, was a topic that got special attention as a new potential threat. (See reftel B for background.) This issue was initially raised by the Chair but a SOPAC representative mentioned that none of the Pacific island countries have legislation for deep sea mining. The SOPAC representative added that these companies are working directly with Governments to assist them in drafting the required legislation. He feared that such "assistance" might benefit the companies more than the countries concerned. Kami asked SOPAC to circulate a paper on this issue so that the concerns could be shared with Governments. One participant commented that regional organizations like SOPAC need to be more proactive and not sit around and wait for requests from Governments; issues such as this one are of regional importance and regional organizations need to bring their concerns to the attention of relevant authorities.

USAID and CTI

¶13. Many RT members were interested in U.S. plans to support the Coral Triangle Initiative (CTI) and had questions about why only six countries were part of the initiative. There seemed to be a general lack of awareness as to what CTI is all about, its process and how it was initiated. RES agreed to provide some background information to the RT Chair for circulation. Generally RT participants sensed that CTI is "the next big thing" in the region and there was considerable interest in ensuring effective implementation of CTI. Possible lessons from the previous projects and experiences, such as the Micronesia Challenge, were also discussed. Some participants expressed a fear that CTI might end up like some other big projects that have come to the region with outsiders driving the agenda and that left no lasting impact. These participants noted that even though some past projects spent lots of money, more than half of the total funds flowed out of the region in the form of consultancies and expatriate salaries.

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Donors and RT

¶14. A number of participants expressed disappointment that not many donors were present at the meeting and urged that France and Australia be reengaged. Some participants speculated that a reason why donors had not responded well to the RT was because it had not proven itself to be an effective body. In response to this concern, RT Chair Kami stated that little attention was given to encouraging donors to attend this meeting, since it was about rethinking the work of the Roundtable and that future meetings would seek to reengage donors.

Comment:

¶15. The Roundtable provides USG participants with an opportunity to sit in on discussions among the major environmental groups that are active in the Pacific and provides insight into the issues that motivate them, their perspectives and activities. It is therefore a useful forum through which we can inform our future engagement in Pacific environmental issues. (For example, the Roundtable is a venue for increasing acceptance of and participation in the Pacific Biological Information Forum, of which the U.S. National Biological Information Infrastructure Pacific Basin Information Node is a major part.) One notable change in Roundtable emphasis will be in its approach to monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the Action Strategy. The previous strategy contained 77 conservation targets--too many for the Roundtable to monitor and report on--and the sheer volume proved impossible to implement. Last October, in Alotau, the Conference dropped specific regional targets from the revised Action Strategy in favor of broad goals. Under the new approach, implementers will develop targets for measuring progress toward these goals in collaboration with countries on a project by project basis. Roundtable participants determined that they could be most effective if they were to monitor the actions of the Roundtable and its members, including their adherence to the Code of Conduct, rather than trying to directly monitor a set of biodiversity and conservation targets across the region.

¶16. This report was coordinated with the USGS NBII Pacific Basin Information Node coordinator and incorporates his input.

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